

Entertaining with wine - part one

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Quantities

A tricky one, tho. Individual capacity for alcohol varies enormously, so you have doubtless observed yourself. No one could possibly accuse a host who provided his or her guests with the equivalent of a bottle of wine a head over the course of an evening of meanness. And yet there are some occasions, a weekday lunch, for example, at which it would be extremely sophisticated to provide one warming bottle (of champagne or white burgundy perhaps) for six people, allowing them each one generous glassful of luxury but minimising the dangerous misuse factor of a bibulous lunch.

As a general rule, an average of between half and a bottle a head consumed over several hours at a table makes for a very jolly occasion. If there are many drinkers in the party then total consumption should be much less. See [this link](#) for a lively discussion of this.

Wine served without a meal is potentially much more potent, especially before lunch when most bodies contain little food to buffer alcohol's effect. A quarter of a bottle a head, or two small glasses, could well be enough if there is a significant proportion of abstemious in the group. However, for a long daytime reception such as a wedding it would be safer to allow half a bottle a head (and as much as a bottle for an all-evening event); if you're placing a large order, most suppliers will allow take or return.

Liquids and nibbles without alcohol

Like many hosts, I frequently overlook the non-alcoholic drinks in my concern to serve just the right wine(s). Try to serve as much water as wine at the table, and to provide a reasonably sophisticated non-alcoholic alternative at parties such as: iced mineral water with fresh orange juice or a drop of elderflower syrup, or spiced tomato juice cocktails before lunch. The most delicious non-alcoholic drink I can remember being served was at a book launch hosted by Amanda Bover. She had prepared a concoction which included cucumber and strawberries for which the recipe is in her English food book that was really refreshing, aromatic and non-cloying.

It makes sense not to drink on an empty stomach. Serving something to eat cuts down quite dramatically on the intoxication rate of an alcoholic spirit(s). Eating slows us down (the only time I encourage my children to three courses) can seem just right, but they are distractingly undernourished and a lot too strongly flavoured for a northern wine like champagne. Rudishes, celery, pickled nuts and quail's eggs are less intrusive, but most of these involve some potentially inconvenient defecus (although halves of quail's egg on a dollop of mayonnaise on toasted rounds of French bread are easy to eat and look glamorous). Little cheesy breads, such as the Dutch Rolke brand or Fudge's cheese straws, complement most wines, as do Italian breadsticks or grissini, even with pine nuts would round them. I also love baked, sautéed almonds although they can leave fingers pretty greasy.

More follow-up on specific types of entertaining and parties later in the week.